

A 14th Century Maltese Link to an Italian Hospitaller Order

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The Byzantine Emperor Constantine the Great [306-337 AD] transformed Rome and the Holy Land into magnets of Christian pilgrimage. The first surviving account of a pilgrim's journey to Jerusalem dates to the year 333 AD; however the Holy Places of Palestine have been visited by pilgrims since the early days of Christianity. The earliest known Palestinian pilgrims were, for the most part, devout souls, many of them clergy or in religious orders.¹ The increasing flow of pilgrims to the various shrines in Europe and the Holy Land required the organisation of hospice services for sick and needy pilgrims throughout the pilgrim routes. One such hospital set up in North Italy along the still uncivilized route between Lucca and Genoa apparently had financial interests in Sicily and the Maltese Islands during the fourteenth century.

Prof. S. Fiorini in 1999 transcribed and published the documents in the *Cancellaria Regia* in the State Archives in Palermo for the period 1259-1400 making the contents of these original sources easily available to researchers. Two of these documents - No. 96 [*Cancellaria* 12, ff.169-170 dated 18.xi.1373] and No. 97 [*Cancellaria* 12, f.170 dated 18.xi.1373] – relate to links between the Maltese Islands and the hospitaller Order of Saint James of Altopascio.² The documents were written in Messina by King Frederick IV of Sicily on the 18th November 1373. The first is addressed to all the *officialibus per Siciliam nec non Insulas Melivetj et Gaudisij* informing them that *Frater Bartholomeus de Gruptis* of the *ordinis hospitalis sanctj Jacobj de Altu Passu* had presented a petition in his name and on behalf of *Fratris Nicolai de Penna* and *Fratris Franciscj de Portu*, also members of the same Order. Their petition asserted that these three friars had been appointed *visitatores* by the recently deceased Augustinian *Frater Robbertus de Bonjsmontibus de Piscia*, master of the said hospital acting on the instruction of a Chapter of the Order which met on the 3rd October 1373. As *visitatores*, the three friars were directed to investigate in these defined provinces all financial and other matters which pertained to the Order. In response to this petition, the King directed the officials of the region to avail all assistance to the three friars in the performance of their duties. The second letter is a copy of the previous directed to unidentified officials.

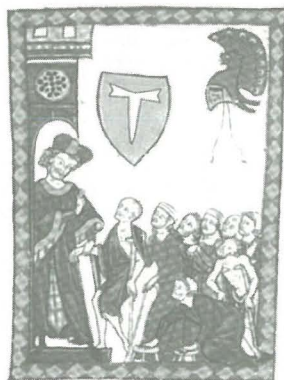


These documents establish a definite link between the Kingdom of Sicily, including the Maltese Islands, and the hospitaller Order of Saint James of Altopascio situated in Lucca, Northern Italy. The Order of St James of Altopascio, also known as the Order of the Tau from its insignia, is considered by some authors to be the oldest of all the military orders. It originated around 952 A.D. with the foundation of a hospital at Altopascio by some Augustinian monks. The town of Altopascio was a centre of assistance along Via Francigena, where pilgrims passed on their way to visit the Volto Santo in Lucca or directed further afield towards Rome and Jerusalem. The Hospital thus became a place where pilgrims, pregnant women, abandoned children and sick people were received and sheltered.³

By 1056, the Order had expanded its hospitaller activities by assuming a military role providing armed escorts for the passage of the pilgrims along the still uncivilized route between Lucca and Genoa. These hospitaller monks of war followed the Augustinian Rule until in 1239 when they obtained Papal approval from Pope Gregory IX to adopt a new specific Rule of the Order.⁴ The Knights of the Order of the Tau wore a very dark grey or black habit with a white truncated or 'tau' cross insignia worn on the left breast. The hood of the habit was probably red, again with a white 'tau' cross. These hospitallers were divided into *frati sacerdoti*, generally three but probably only one in the peripheral houses; *pappini* or servants acting as nurses, who included also female members called *sorore*; and a tertiary branch *terz'ordine* who included the lay members including the knights chosen from the nobility.

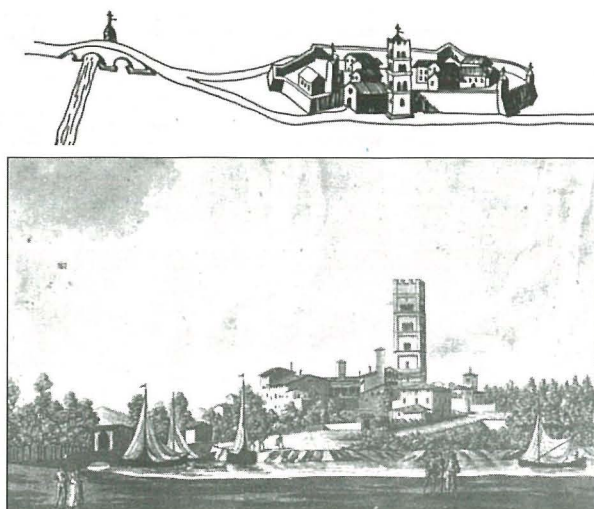
The new Rule of the Order was established during the mastership of Frater Galligo or Gallico, who held the post of Master and Rector from 1228 to 1249 inclusive. It appears that the period was one of great prosperity and activity of the institution - certainly associated with augmentation to the mother institution in 1241.⁵ The Rule of the Order of St James of Altopascio was based on the Statutes adopted by the Hospitaller Order of St. John in Jerusalem drawn up by the Master of that Order Raymond du Puy in ~1150. The latter

Statutes included details as to “How Our Lords the Sick Should be Received and Served. And in that Obedience in which the Master and the Chapter of the Hospital shall permit when the sick man shall come there, let him be received thus: let him partake of the Holy Sacrament, first having confessed his sins to the priest, and afterwards let him be carried to bed, and there as if he were a Lord, each day before the brethren go to eat, let him be refreshed with food charitably according to the ability of the House...”⁶



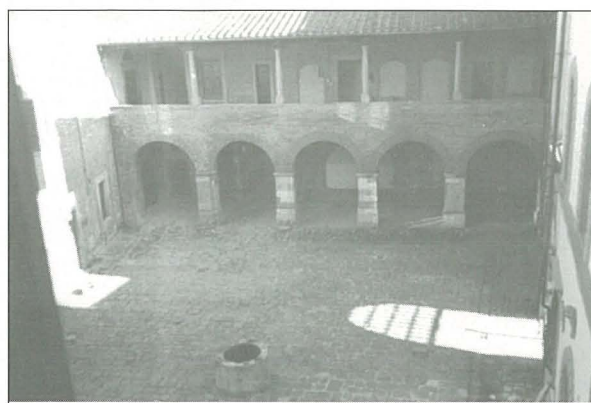
Miniature showing the care of the sick and pilgrims by the Order of St James of Altopascio

The Rule was a detailed one outlining even in Chapter XLVI the diet that was to be served to the sick and the pilgrims. The diet varied according to season and included chicken, pork, beef, and lamb. In spring, fish, eggs, cereals, vegetables and legumes were served. The diet had also to be integrated by some fruit. The bread for the sick was made with the best part of the flour. A soup cauldron – *il calderon di Altopascio* – was kept boiling day and night to furnish food for pilgrims.⁴ The richness of the soup was commented upon by the 14th century Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio in his *Decameron* when the cowl of Guccio Imbratta was noted to have enough grease stains to supply the soup caldrons of Altopascio. The hospital's renowned generosity further led Nicolò Machiavelli in his 1525 comedy *Clizia* to use the term *morir di fame ad Altopascio* (to die of hunger at Altopascio) to denote stupidity, since it was impossible not to find food in the hospital.



Plan and etching of the Hospital and Cloister of Altopascio

While never numerous, the Order expanded its hospitaller activities in other European countries including France and England. In England, the Order ran a hospital – the hospital of High Gate – at Islington. This continued to function well until 1626. In Paris, the daughter house was set up in 1180 and the region still houses the parish dedicated to S Jacques de Haut-Pas. During the 13th century, its position bordering on the Valdinievole turned Altopascio into a castle with walls, gates and towers. Following the fall of Acre in 1291 and the resulting decline in fervour for pilgrimage, the fortunes of the Order took a downward trend. Its decline was further accelerated in the 14th century after the papacy transferred its seat to Avignon with the resulting decrease in passing pilgrims. The decline continued in the following century, when Altopascio lost its strategic importance owing to the Florentine occupation of the fortress of Montecarlo.



Courtyard of the Hospital of St James of Altopascio

During the fifteenth century [1447-1537], the Order received the patronage of the Florentine dei Capponi family whose family members served as *Rector et Magister* to the Order. This patronage received acceptance from Pontiff Sixtus IV in 1472. The Capponi family transformed the hospital to create new spaces. This was achieved by the demolition of many buildings. The cloister was cut by half to make place for a court and the Porta del Giardino was opened. In 1508, the existing hospital, situated on the left side of the Magra River, was replaced by the San Giacomo d'Altopascio Monastery to serve as a cloister for the monkish knights of the Order. The church, dedicated to Saints Jacopo, Egidio and Cristoforo was built inside the ancient Hospital. It is certain that the present day church of Sant Jacopo and the annexed court of the Hospitallers formed the original core of the ancient complex, while the bell tower dates back to the second half of the thirteenth century. The church as it appears today is the result of a reconstruction carried out in 1830.

The Capponi patronage came to an end in 1537 following the excommunication by Pope Paul III of the contemporaneous dei Capponi *Rector et Magister* for refusing to relinquish the office to one of the Pope's nephews. Following the excommunication, the Order was “adopted” and received the patronage of the Grifoni family, whose member – Ugolini Grifoni – also served as *Rector et*

Magister for the next 40 years. In 1587, the Order of Saint James of Altopascio was disbanded on the command of the Grand Duke Cosimo I de' Medici of Tuscany and the approval of Pope Sixtus V, and was absorbed by the Knights of St Stephen of Tuscany, recently constituted to defend Christianity against the Turks. The Monastery underwent structural modifications in 1641. It was closed down and transformed into a girls' school by order of the Grand Duke Pietro Leopoldo in 1785.⁷

The Order of Saint James does not appear to have been responsible for any hospitals in the Maltese Islands. The earliest established hospital in Malta was *hospitalis Sancti Francisci*, situated outside the Medieval walls of Mdina. A collation document from King Frederick IV referring to the administration of the hospital dated 4th December 1372 confirms that the hospital had already been "*ad presens vacat*". The administration in 1372 was delegated to *fratem Nicolaum Papalla ordinis minorum confessorem*.⁸ A summation document of the *Regia Cancellaria* post-1347 register kept in the Secret Vatican Archives suggests that St. Francis Hospital was functioning during the second half of the 14th century during the reign of King Frederick IV [1355-1377] under the direction of *Frati Paulo Papalla*.^{9,10} The relevance of this document has been disputed¹¹; but an earlier existence of the hospital, even as early as 1299, has been proposed on the basis of the land holdings linking the hospital to the Cathedral.¹² It has been suggested by "*Il dott. Gerlach, che l'Ospedale Santo Spirito, uno del piu' antiche di Europa, sia stato istituto pei lebbrosi*", thus explaining its extra-mural situation¹³. There is no contemporary documentary proof to this effect, though the welfare of those afflicted with leprosy was a particular concern of the Franciscan Order during the Medieval period where every novice was obliged to serve some period of his novitiate in a leprosarium.¹⁴ There is to date no evidence for the presence of leprosy, leprosaria or the leper-dedicated Order of St. Lazarus in Medieval Malta. The first recorded case of leprosy in Malta involved a Dominican friar who died in the Rabat convent at Malta in 1629.¹⁵ Furthermore, there was in 1575 no apparent prevalent veneration to St Lazarus considered the patron saint of Lepers¹⁶ and the name *Lazaro* appears for the first time in relation to a land area at Ghasri, Gozo willed as a chantry benefice to the local Church in October 1592.¹⁷

A second Medieval hospital - *hospitale Sancti Petri* - situated within the walls of Mdina was functioning in 1418.¹⁸ The management of the new Hospital of St Peter was conceded to the Augustinian Friars in 1434.¹⁹ This hospital was suppressed in 1455 by brief of Pope Calixtus III when the building was adapted to house the Benedictine Nunnery²⁰. The Medieval hospital in Rabat, Gozo was established by a bequest of Francesco Bonnici in 1454 *pro receptione et hospitalitate pauperum pellegrinorum*.²¹ This hospital was by 1569 known as *hospitalis Sancti Spiritus*, and eventually by 1575 as *hospitale Sancti Juliani*.^{22,23} It appears that this latter hospital was initially founded to provide hospitality and shelter for pilgrim travellers, but subsequently became an institution catering for the sick, poor and infirm.

Another Hospitaller Order which appears to have had financial links with the Maltese Islands in the 14th century was the Order of St. Anthony or Antonines. A document in the Cancellaria Regia of the State Archives, Palermo refers to a petition by *Frater Johannes Venancij Cole de Busano*, representing the *domibus Sancti Antonij* to enable him to exercise his rights as procurator over property in the realm of Sicily and the Maltese Islands.²⁴ The information in the document relating to the properties of *Sancti Antonij* is insufficient to enable a true identification but most likely refers to the Hospital Brothers of St Anthony which was founded by Gaston of Dauphiné (c.1095) and his son, in thanksgiving for miraculous relief from "St Anthony's fire" or ergotism, a disease then epidemic.^(a) There appears to have been a devotion to St Anthony the Hermit in Medieval Malta since one of the 15th century Greek-style frescoes in St. Agatha's Crypt at Rabat, Malta depicts this saint.²⁵ The Order built a hospital near the Church of St Anthony at Saint-Didier de la Mothe, which became their central house. The brothers devoted themselves to the care of the sick, particularly those afflicted with St Anthony's fire. Members of the Order wore a black habit with the Tau cross insignia in blue. The congregation spread through France, Spain, and Italy, and gave the Church a number of distinguished scholars and prelates. Among their privileges was that of caring for the sick of the papal household. With wealth came relaxation of discipline and a reform was ordained in 1616 and partially carried out. In 1777 the congregation was canonically united with the Knights of Malta, but was suppressed during the French Revolution.²⁶

During the Medieval Period, sick-nursing started to be viewed as a Christian duty, and the setting up of medical establishments became considered a philanthropic activity. These establishments took the various forms depending on their function. These included the *xenodochium* aimed to give solace to poor and infirm pilgrims; and the *hospitium* aimed at giving long-term solstice to the chronic sick and infirm. A specialised form of the latter was the *leprosorum* which housed those afflicted with leprosy. These institutions were often endowed with significant land holdings by rulers and individuals to ensure a continuing financial support for the institutions.

Footnote

(a) There are five religious communities or orders under the patronage of St. Anthony the Hermit, or professing to follow his rule: (1) The Disciples of St. Anthony est. c.305 AD; (2) The Hospital Brothers of St. Anthony est. c.1095; (3) The Antonians est. 17th cent.; (4) The Congregation of St. Anthony est. 1615; and (5) Chaldean Antonians est.1809.

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Endnote: Cancellaria Regia documents

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Eodem, Jbidem apud Messanam.

+ Pro fratre Bartholomeo et procuratoribus hospitalis Sancti Jacoby de Alto Passu.

Scriptum est per patentes licteras universis officialibus per Siciliam nec non Insulas Melivetj et Gaudisij constitutis tarn presentibus quam futuris presentes licteras Inspecturis fidelibus suis etc. Prater Bartholomeus de Grupis ordinis hospitalis Sancti Jacoby de Alto Passu devotus noster presens noviter in conspectu nostro tarn pro se quam pro nomine et pro parte fratris Nicolaj de Penna et fratris Franciscj de Portu ejusdem ordinis collegiarum suorum maiestati nostre humiliter supplicavit ut cum reverendus in Christo pater frater Robbertus olim definitus(?) de Bonjmontibus de Piscia dej et apostolice sedis

gracia magister hospitalis et mansionis Sancti Jacoby de Alto Passu ordinis Sancti Augustini Lucanensis dyocesis ad Romanam ecclesiam nullo modo pertinentis de consilio, consensu et assensu presencia et voluntate capituli et fratrum suorum confissus de probitate, sufficiencia, legalitate et industria dictorum fratrum Nicolaj, Bartholomej et Franciscj eodem ad hec presentes et acceptantes fecerint, constituerint et ordinaverint pro se ipsis et eorum nuncios speciales ac visitatores et vicarios generates prefatorum magistrj et capituli revocando, cassando et annullando omnes alios syndicos et procuratores per dictos magistrum, fratres et capitulum in certis partibus vel aliquibus Jpsorum constitutis videlicet per totum regnum Sicilie citra et ultra farum in Insula Melivetj ac visitandum, regendum, gubernandum, petendum et habendum, manutenendum et custodiendum omnia et singula [f. 169^v] hospitalia, ecclesias, domus, predia et bona et alia et ecciam quascunque elemosinas, acciones, Jura et Jurisdicciones cujuscunque status ordinis et condicionis existant ospitalis eiusdem que et quas dictum hospitalem Sancti Jacoby habet et habere posset in prenomatis partibus et provinciis; Eosque locandum, dislocandum et de bono in melius commutandum quibuscunque cultoribus et personis, Jpsorumque fructus, redditusque proventus petendum, exigendum et recipiendum ac singulas

elemosinas, testamenta, ereditates, Judicia testamentorum, quietaciones et legata relicta ac totum et omne id et quicquid dicto hospitali et mansioni quocunque modo, titulo vel iure debetur [et] debebitur in futurum in partibus antedictis prout hec [et] alia in quodam procur[ato]rio propterea eis facto asservit plenius contineri. Et super hijs indegit auxilio brachijs (sic) secularis, brachium ipsum sibi impartiri mandare nostra serenitas dignaretur cujusmodi supplicacionj de benignitate regia ac ex debito nostre presencie annuentes quia de premissis omnibus et singulis per quoddam procur[ato]rium per dictos magistrum dictj hospitalis capitulum et fratres proinde factum olim anno domini millesimo trecentesimo septuagesimo tercio Indicione duodecima die tercio raensis octobris pontificatus sanctissimi in Christo patris domini Gregorij divina providencia Romane et universalis matris ecclesie pape undecimj anno tercio in terra Piscie manu Bartholomei olim Tholim de Sancta Cruce Vallis Arny Inferioris Lucanensis dyocesis Imperialj auctoritate Judicis ordinarij atque notarij puplicj et nunc notarij et scribe predictorum magistrj, fratrum ordinis et capituli proinde fratrem Bartholomeum et collegas nostre curie presentatum quod propterea Jnsipij Jussimus atque legi dicta nostra curia plenarie fidem sumpsit volentes ecclesias et monasteria atque hospitalia sub nostra potestate posita et specialiter dictam domum et hospitalem Sancti

Jacoby ob reverenciam ipsius apostulj favorem et pler]ceptionem nostrj nominis defensivj ecciam et gaudere nam dum dictis ecclesiis favorem nostrum Justus Jmpenditur divine maiestatis suorumque apostolorum et sanctorum Jussionibus obeditur fidelitaj vestre firmiter et expresse mandamus quatenus predicto septenni o perdurante dictis procuratoribus et cultibet eorum ad requisicionem ipsorum alias eorum alterius vobis pro parte nostre curie faciendam super omnibus superius declaratis et eciam super requisicionem spiritualium Jurium, bonorum et rerum aliarum domus prediate quantus de Jure fuerit assistatis pro parte dicte nostre curie ope favore ac auxilio opportunis qualiter ipsis mediantibus procuretis [f. 170] prefati et substituendi ab eis premissa omnia exequi valeant laudabiliter et complere vosque proinde occurratis coram [c]elsitudine nostra merito come[n]damus. Data etc. Data etc. (sic)

Eodem, Jbidem.

Pro eisdem procuratoribus.

Jn similj modo et forma facte sunt alie consimeles patentes directe officialibus pro dictis procuratoribus hospitalis Sancti Jacoby. Datum etc.